

THE CUCUMIS CLUB

By Maurice Hill



▲ September 1908: Maurice Hill enjoying a "cucumis."

The Cucumis Club was one of the most popular and interesting of the older organizations of Lodi.

On the evening of Thursday, February 13, 1896, the new organization held its first meeting under the name of the Study Club.

A notice appeared in the February 29, 1896 issue of the Lodi Sentinel regarding the club. At this time the Study Club had just had its third meeting. The membership by this date had reached over 40 in number.

Historical and current subjects formed the work for the evening. Mrs. B.A. Laws acted as leader in the historical discussion and Matt Hamilton did duty in the same capacity in the discussion of current events.

By February 22, 1896 the newly organized Study Club petitioned to the trustees of the Lodi Free Library to be allowed to take charge of the library, increase the number of books, employ a regular librarian and keep the institution going in first-class shape.

The local newspaper commented "that the trustees will grant the petitioners the privileges asked and the result will be more favorable to the library and its patrons."

On April 16, 1896 the Study Club gave time to a short study of the works of Goldsmith, Gray and Burns, with the latter "winning the evening by storm." A meeting scheduled for April 30th was to "treat the public to a Burns evening."



▲ Kettelman family having a music social. Back row, l to r: Clara, George, Fred and Dave Kettelman, plus Sam Axtell. Middle row: Lucy Gertin on far right. Front row, l to r: unknown, unknown, Rebecca Kettelman and John Emele.

Jeannie Kettelman Photo

In the Lodi Sentinel of November 14, 1896 it was announced that the Study Club had been reorganized under a new name "and promises to be an interesting literary and social society. A new plan of pursuing knowledge has been entered upon."

At this point, the Study Club lost its identity in the new name. In a 1896 issue of the Lodi Sentinel one learns that or club appears as the Cucumis Club.

Cucumis, the fruit of the vine, and in this case in Lodi we are talking about the watermelon, which was very popular in 1896 before grapes became the dominating crop.

A lengthy piece appears in the local paper of a special entertainment put on by the Cucumis Club at Smith's Hall on the evening of December 15, 1896.

The article regarding the affair is given verbatim as it appeared in print under the heading of "The Mock Trial."

"The much expected mock trial came off Wednesday evening in Smith's Hall. Seating room was out of the question for the big hall was simply packed until even the window recesses were filled.

At seven o'clock the hall was beginning to fill and long before the opening the crowd was all in. One great attraction was the price of admission, 10¢.

As the trial progressed, the audience applauded, held their breath and shrieked with laughter by turns. There was always something to create a laugh and the character witnesses were especially comical.

E.B. Wright acted as clerk of the court, Fred Dougherty as bailiff and Miss Carter of Acampo as court reporter.

The complaint charged G. Washington LeMoin with stealing one large turkey from Charles Sollars on the night of November 24, 1895.

The jury was quickly chosen and one of the most comical oaths ever gotten up was administered. They promised to try the case without regard to law, order or decency.

Then the witnesses came in and they took a more laughable oath than that administered to the jury. Among other things they promised not to tell the truth, and they succeeded in a manner which would put Frank Cordway to shame.

The prosecution's witnesses had a wonderful lot of evidence connecting the defendant with the crime. One said he saw the defendant enter the building and emerge with a turkey. Another had a photograph of the footprint and another saw him enter the hotel and one was bribed into silence by a Thanksgiving dinner. The Chinese cook told his story of his employer's strange actions while the aforesaid fowl was in the hotel. A detective also gave evidence of a very damaging character, a wielder of forceps and laughing gas gave scientific testimony about a bone and the teeth and a number of others gave equally damaging and ludicrous exhibitions of fancy flights and conscience stretchers.

Then the lawyers had an inning and amid their uproarious fight the bailiff took a hand and disarmed them and among other deadly weapons two fiery flasks were taken away.

For the defense came witnesses proving that Mr. Le Moin did not take the turkey. One witness, "wandering Willie Watertank," stated that he had broken into the soda works building and caused the exodus of the fowl. He also stated that the prosecution's detective was with him in Stockton jail and did not get out here at all. They, too, had a Chinese cook, and he swore that the other fellow was only a dishwasher and an opium fiend and utterly incompetent in any other capacity. Their detective stated that in accordance with instructions he had shadowed the defendant day and



▲ Lodi girls playing cards.

Charlene Parson Photo



▲ Our 44 star flag displayed. Top Row: Unknown. 3rd Row: Amy Elam, Monie Callahan, Ruth Dunning and Lanna Page. 2nd Row: Sadie Pedrick, Hazel (LeMoin) Wilkenson, Geraldine Gehan and Lottie Wallace. 1st Row: Jennie Beronio, Julia Sturdevant, Bessie Merrill and May (Bender) McLachlan.

night during the Thanksgiving week, hence he could not have committed the deed. Others testified to many and wonderful things and it was clearly proved that the defendant gave away a number of turkeys, having more than he needed, which went to show that he had no need of stolen birds. Then a witness for the prosecution was recalled and confessed that Mr. Sollars had him bribed to tell a pre-arranged story. It was evident that the end was near and in a few minutes the testimony was all in.

After a brief oratorical fight by the attorneys, G.L. Shoals and G.F. McNoble, Judge Hemphill charged the jury and after a brief conference they returned a verdict of not guilty.

The Cucumis Club, under the auspices the affair was given, is to be complimented upon its success. The door receipts amounted to \$40.00.

It is assumed that as of January 8, 1897, the Cucumis Club brought the noted poet, Joaquin Miller to Lodi and that he appeared in Hill's Hall on Monday evening, January 4, 1897. A small audience was present to hear the poet - "about 40 ladies present and half as many men. The receipts were \$15.00."

Miller gave a talk on the mountains of the western coast beginning with Mt. Saint Elias and ending with



▲ Janita (Corson) Pope and Alma (Pope) Pinkerton. Vesta Mason Photo

Popocatapetl.

"The poet said some good things, but the best of his evening's entertainment were the side remarks occasioned by the blunders of his assistant, and the stories and poems he gave while the assistant tinkered with his stereopticon."

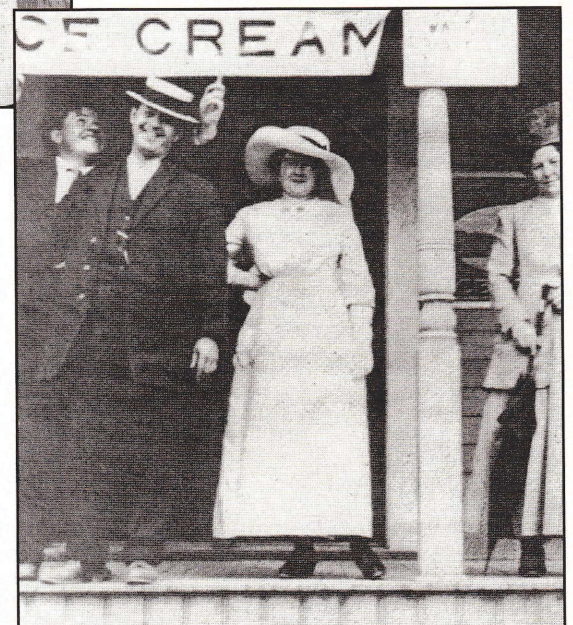
"To illustrate the lecture, Professor Wagner accompanied the poet with a magic lantern and a lot of photographic slides. Professor Wagner

is a mournful failure as a manager of the stereopticon. Monday evening was his second appearance here and each was a disappointment to his audience. His light snapped and whistled and sent out at frequent intervals, his pictures on the screen were seldom distinct, and when by chance, he presented one in fairly good style he made haste to remove it. The poet should dispense with the professor at once."

"Joaquin Miller can entertain an audience well and he needs no magic lantern attachment. His recitations, "William Brown," "The Fortunate Isles" and "The Dove" were worthy of their author and his sketches of mountain and Indian life, with his singing of the Indian hymn were inimitable. Without Professor Wagner his efforts would be well received in any community of culture."

Later in January 1897 the Cucumis orchestra came into being. It was composed of Professor George L. Plummer, first violin; Will Springer, 2nd violin; Ed Hutchins, cornet; Dr. Colman, flute; Louis Rieffel, clarinet; and Miss Mattie Christie, piano.

The Cucumis Club held their regular Thursday night meeting on New Year's Eve 1896 at which time a short business meeting was followed with a varied program. This, in turn, was fol-



▲ Lodi ice cream social.

lowed by games and dancing until refreshments were brought in.

It became the custom to have a debate at the close of the musical and literary program at each meeting of the Cucumis Club. Those members who were gifted in the art of public speaking and debate were pitted against the two other able speakers. A subject often pertaining to current politics and other chosen and varied subjects gave the participants ample opportunity to display their argumentative abilities and provided the receptive audience not only with entertainment, but was the impetus for cultural improvement.

Maurice Hill's father, G.W. Hill, took part occasionally on the Cucumis Club debates.

On April 1, 1897 at the regular meeting of the Cucumis Club, the committee on the library question made its report. The committee concluded that unless \$700.00 could be raised it would be of no use to further consider the Club taking over the Lodi Free Library. It was decided to prepare a list of possible subscribers and see how large a paid up membership could be obtained. The Club took no action, leaving the problem to come up for future consideration.

Instead of the usual literary and musical program the time was given

over to games and dancing.

In the Lodi Sentinel of November 27, 1897 there is a lengthy column devoted to the Cucumis minstrel show which was to be given in Smith's Hall on the 29th (Monday evening). The write-up following the affair is not available but the preview given in the above mentioned paper indicates a program of good singing including the Forrester's quartet of Stockton, the local Cucumis orchestra and the usual line of humor and fun connected with a minstrel show. There were to be two performances, and admissions were: reserved seats 35¢, general admission 25¢ and children 15¢. Incidentally, the performers were to be all men. The proceeds from the first night were to go towards hall rent and other expenses, while the proceeds of the second evening's performance to go for seven sets of new scenery for Smith's Hall. This scenery was to be free for all Lodi entertainments but traveling companies would have to pay for the rent of the scenery. The article noted that "The new scenery and stage settings will give Lodi a theatre second to none among towns anywhere near its size."

At this time black face was the covering of your skin with burnt cork and painting on wide, white lips. It was an

important part of vaudeville. The black-face comedian had started in the minstrel shows of the 1800's and had been carried over to variety shows and then to vaudeville. It had no racial meaning at all, even great black stars like Bert Williams put on blackface. Performers wearing black didn't imitate blacks, most of them spoke in their ordinary voices. The only thing that blackface meant was that the person wearing it was working in show business at a different time where just about everyone blacked up, including Jolson, Jessel, Cantor, Jack Benny and George Burns.

The men's minstrel show inspired the local ladies to prepare and put on a minstrel show themselves as of December 16, 1897. After the minstrel show, a social dance was to follow.

In regard to the forthcoming show, the Lodi Sentinel gave the following bit of advice, "Ladies on the front rows, please remove your hats that night."

Fortunately the resume of the ladies minstrel show is available and appeared in the December 18, 1897 issue of the Lodi Sentinel. A page and a half length column was devoted to what appeared to be an outstanding production.

The newspaper calls the production the show of the year and the article is introduced by the heading "A



▲ Lodi Opera House in 1914, featuring the Ladies Minstrel Show.



▲ The Lodi Ladies Minstrel Show in 1914 at the Lodi Opera House.

Hot Time In Town."

Quoting from the review, "There was not a person in the whole great audience who had even the semblance of a growl. The chronic kicker was so completely captured that he forgot his time-worn motive and expanded his jaws in one long, loud, continuous laugh, while his feet threatened to stamp the floor into the ground."

"To show what can be done in a short time, it is only necessary to state that the ladies were just a little over a week in arranging for the entertainment."

One striking feature was the entrance of the minstrels of two weeks ago. They had the front or "bald-headed row" of 24 chairs reserved. After everybody was in and the curtain about to go up they marched upstairs (the hall was on the second floor) in single file, each carrying a cane with about a yard of red ribbon attached thereto. For a moment they stood motionless, then somebody said, "Gentlemen, be seated" and down they sat as one man amid a roar of applause.

The lady minstrels wore red coats, yellow vests, white and black bloomers and white leggings. The fake orchestra was all in white and created a heavy laugh by its antics. Of course, not one of them made a sound, but the way they burlesqued the Cucumis orchestra was good.

When the big curtain went up and the lady minstrels made their first bow to the public, such a storm of good will greeted them that for a minute the end girls could only wave their arms and speak in mute show.

Every last thing that could be encored was recalled by continued demands that simply would not cease. The program lasted two and a half hours, after which a social dance ensued.

Mrs. Frances Cogswell acted as interlocutor while Mrs. C.M. Ferdun and Mrs. James Christie made fun on the left and Misses Ida Lillie and Belle Perrott saw that nothing passed them on the other end.

The program was as follows:

PART I

Chorus By entire Co.

Christening of the Little
Black Coon Ora Tredway
Chorus "Old Kentucky Home" . . Co.
Lullaby Eva Bailey
For Goodness Sake Don't
Say I Told You Ida Lillie
Love's Serenade Addine LeMoin
Quartet "High School
Medley" Addine LeMoin, Ora
Tredway, Eva Beckman, Mrs. Cowell
Don't Fool, That Black
Gals' Mine Bessie Corbin
Slumber Sea Mrs. R.L. Cowell
Burlesque Chorus . Led by Eva Shidy

PART II

Quartet Addine LeMoin, Lottie
LeMoin, Eva Shidy, Mrs. Cowell
Specialty . . . Mrs. Jas. Christie (Aunt
El) and Ellie and Nellie Corbin
Violin Solo Geo. Plummer
Selection Woodbridge
Mandolin Quartet
Balcony Scene from
Romeo and Juliet . Misses Eva Shidy
and Addine LeMoin
Ballet Dance . Mme. La Toska (female

impersonation), Theron R. Lillie Cullud Ladies Convensun . By entire Company led by Miss Jennie Jahant

From newspaper items it is learned that the Cucumis orchestra was in demand to play for various public dances. It is noted that the orchestra played for the New Year's Ball at Clements and that "This combination is in demand all the time."

As of January 15, 1898, the Cucumis Club orchestra announced they would put on a social dance in Smith's Hall every two weeks beginning with Saturday evening, January 22nd. On the evening of Thursday, January 22, 1898 Hill's Hall was packed, the Cucumis Club having invited the public to come and be entertained. Even standing room was at a premium.

The review of the affair states the public was pleasantly and interestingly entertained. The program was arranged in excellent taste and the participants gave their selections in a

clever way that spoke of considerable preparation. The debate was declared to be the best yet and 'held the audience in eager expectancy till the last word had been spoken.' The subject was, "If the European Powers Partition China should the United States participate." Profs. Cowell and Wright wielded the sword for the negative and Rev. Patterson and Prof. Wooten waxed eloquent for the affirmative. Rev. Patterson and his colleague made a hard but losing uphill fight and fought to the last trench. The judges were divided on the question, giving the negative two votes and the affirmative one."

The complete program consisted of the following:

Selection Orchestra
 Recitation Lulu Villinger
 Vocal Duet Mesdames Thompson and Krause
 Club paper "Rodeo" . Addine LeMoin and Claude Van Gelder

Vocal Trio Addine LeMoin, Messrs. Woodworth and Welch
 Violin Solo Geo. Plummer
 Vocal Duet Mrs. G.W. Hill, Daisy Pleas

Selection Orchestra
 Debate

Selection Orchestra

In the latter 1890's the Cucumis Club was constantly in the news which attested to its continuing and even growing popularity. It had probably the most diversified programs of any local organization.

On the evening of January 29, 1899 the Club had their usual meeting. The treasurer's report showed a balance of \$80.00 but \$50.00 of this amount was pledged to pay for folding chairs which the Club had purchased for Smith's Hall. The scenery, spoken of earlier in this article, had already been paid for although the illness of the artist (probably Mr. McLaughlin) forced him to cancel the



▲ The Lodi Ladies Minstrel Show: Gwen Fisher, Leah Benedict, Ralphine Mills, Lil Ferdun, Merle Scott, Blossom Kilgore, and Castle Gammon.

full engagement. However, a number of very pretty scenes were now the property of the Club.

After the business meeting the entertainment committee took charge of the meeting. Then, the fun began. "The girls drove nails and the boys sewed buttons. The girl who could drive the most nails in a given time into a block of wood and the young man who could sew the most buttons onto a piece of cloth were to receive prizes. Well, that's harder than it sounds though some of the young ladies did exhibit considerable skill with a hammer in pounding their fingers and thumbs, and some of the young men gave symptoms of having been there before with a needle and thread.

It was "rat, tat, tat, claterty bang!" with the hammers and a desperate silence with the needles until a feminine shriek announced that some fair maid had missed the nail and caught her finger and muttered manly "blankety-blank" as some festive youth managed to jab the needle half way through his fist. Then, their friends stood around and laughed at the fun. When the wreckage was cleared away and sore fingers were gingerly tied up in handkerchiefs, it was found that the winners were Miss Maud Oxley and Albert Carter. Thus closed one of the most enjoyable Club meetings held in



▲ March 9, 1895. Woodbridge College also influenced society at this time.



▲ Salem School girls. Back row: Neta Williams, unknown, Carrie Ivory, unknown, Alma Tindal, unknown, and Rebecca Kettelman. Front row: First four unknown, Ella Tindall, Florence (Huffman) Sinks, Daisy Pleas, and Clara Kettelman.
Jeannie Kettelman Photo

some time. The entertainment committee was a new feature and was rapidly coming out with many pleasant surprises.

At the meeting of the Cucumis Club the evening of March 24th the problem of the "chair and scenery propositions" came up again for discussion. It seems the Club purchased 50 folding chairs for Smith's Hall and these did service upon two occasions but were found to be very inferior and unfit for use. The committee then returned them to the dealer. "Now the question many Club members are asking and finding unanswered is where are our chairs and our fifty dollars? Nobody seems to know just what disposition had been made of either. The unfit chairs were supposed to have been exchanged for a better grade. That was quite some time ago and now members are wondering what has been happening unknown to them."

Then several sets of fine scenery were purchased by the Club to aid the town in producing plays and other entertainments. The scenery, with the chairs, was to be under the control of the Club, but were also a sort of community property. It was decided to charge all traveling troops a certain sum for use of the scenery in Smith's Hall while it would be free to all home

talent. A committee was appointed to put this rule into effect. During the past two weeks, a traveling company had been using the Club's scenery and the rent rule had not been applied. At least the members state that nobody can be found who seems to have any power to act." It was decided to pursue the subject at the next meeting.

Reviewing the history of the Cucumis Club, "it was first organized in 1896 under the name the "Study Club" and met in Stoddard's Hall. The study of English literature was the object and a beginning was made with Chaucer. "Then followed a short study of the literature of each succeeding period. A long list of by-laws was prepared to govern the club and dues were placed at 10¢ per month. After a brief but interesting life the Club adjourned to be revived in the following autumn at the home of Mrs. L.B. Laws, where at the first meeting Matt Hamilton, president of the "Study Club" declined the presidency of the reformed organization. Thereupon Prof. A.T. Searle was elected to the office. The name of the organization was changed to "Cucumis" which the Greek and Latin scholars said meant "watermelon." The name clung to the organization from there on.

The second season of existence



▲ Group at the Setzer home in Lodi, CA, Sept. 5, 1909. L to r: Unknown, Mrs. Setzer, Clara Pope, and Nellie Hill in front.
Photo taken by Fred Setzer

proved highly successful but a change was made from study to more social lines. Programs replaced the study of authors and occasionally a social dance was held after the meeting adjourned. The old by-laws were discarded and the Club worked in harmony without a single written rule or a cent of dues. When it ran short of funds an entertainment replenished

the treasury.

The Club resumed meetings in the winter of 1898 with only one change made – the Club forbade dancing at its meetings. During the latter part of the 1898 term the members have not manifested the interest which once predominated and a spirit of inharmony has occasionally cropped out. The Club was presented with a silver mounted gavel by G.W. Hill and inscribed “Cucumis Club.” The Cucumis Club met for its last meeting of the season, March 31, 1898.

Treasurer Wright made his report accounting for all monies received and disbursed during the present term. The report showed a balance in the treasury of \$20.00.

After the program, the young men held a hurried consultation, then invited the gathering over to Smith’s Hall to celebrate the closing with a dance. It is needless to say the company which was thus taken advantage of by such a pleasant surprise did not delay and in a few minutes Cucumis orchestra was playing the sweet strains of the opening dance.

The Cucumis Club got out a Club paper for a time at least. Among the papers of my father, G.W. Hill, I found a sheaf of original writings by him

marked “Editor, Cucumis Club” so it is evident that he was editor of the paper after it was revived. Here is the editorial written by Hill for the first issue of the published paper:

“The “Rodeo” (Club paper) like the Phoenix has risen again from the ashes of its former greatness and though we do not expect to make it immortal yet we do expect to make it not only a source of pleasure but also of instruction as well.

We believe “The Rodeo” should fill an important place in our Club and should receive the hearty support of its members. The paper should possess a high moral tone refraining from all offensive personalities. Every member should bear in mind the paper will be just what we make it. Let us aim high putting forth every effort to produce a paper that will long be remembered with pleasure.”

This author has never seen a copy of the Cucumis paper, as the above editorial was not dated, it is not known just when this issue was published, when it first came into being or how long it lasted; however, “The Rodeo” is mentioned in a write-up about the Cucumis Club in January of 1898 so it is known it was in existence at that time.

No more is known about the Cucumis Club. There are no available papers to consult following the last seasonal meeting in March of 1898. At this time there was a vague hint in the newspaper that this might turn out to be the last of the Club meetings.

It is probable that when the Club forbade dancing which usually followed the business meeting and program, interest lagged and attendance was affected.

But, glowing newspaper accounts remain which prove that for two years the Cucumis Club was extremely popular and held an important place in the social and cultural life of Lodi.

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